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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR ENGAGES MALACANANG SECRETARY ESPERON ON  
PEACE PROCESS, OTHERS ISSUES

Classified By: Ambassdor Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador met April 3 with Secretary Hermogenes Esperon, head of the presidential management staff, to discuss developments in Mindanao. In Esperon's view, all sides in the Mindanao conflict desire an early return to peace negotiations, which will likely resume as soon as Malaysian facilitators are ready. Esperon was attentive to the Ambassador's concerns over leaks by the Philippine Department of Justice in the high-profile extradition cases of three former Philippine policemen who are wanted in connection with a widely publicized double murder in 2000. Esperon expressed agreement that the time was overdue for resolution of the long-simmering controversial rape conviction of a U.S. Marine. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) In discussing the current status of the Mindanao peace process, Esperon, President Arroyo's former peace process adviser, explained that he keeps open back channels of communication with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and stays in close touch with his successor, Avelino Razon. Secretary Esperon was upbeat in his assessment that all parties sought an early return to negotiations, and that talks could resume as soon as Malaysian facilitators were ready - quickly adding that the MILF would not participate in the absence of the Malaysians. Given the serious reversals in the peace process that started in early August of 2008, Esperon opined that at this point, the modest goal was simply to return to the negotiating table, although he nonetheless believes that more can be achieved, depending on how soon Malaysian facilitators can get organized. The Ambassador described how, in her recent travels to the southern Philippines, it was her very strong sense that everyone shared a desire for peace, a view with which Esperon agreed. Esperon outlined how recent "consultation" visits to affected areas by Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo were primarily intended to keep the peace process alive until Malaysia is ready to reconvene talks.

¶3. (C) Turning to the subject of the high-profile extradition cases of three Philippine former policemen wanted in connection with the highly-publicized 2000 murders of public relations executive Salvador Dacer and his driver Emmanuel Corbito, Esperon shared his frustration at continued legal maneuverings that have repeatedly postponed the return of former PNP officers Glenn Dumlao, Cezar Mancao, and Michael Ray Aquino. The Ambassador underscored how public statements by Philippine Department of Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez regarding the timing and logistics of the extradition subjects' movements were counterproductive, and might not only delay the extradition process in these cases, but even imperil broader cooperation on other judicial matters. Esperon clearly understood the seriousness of such security leaks.

¶4. (C) Esperon, a former four-star Army general and Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, discussed with the Ambassador who might next assume his former role. Esperon postulated that

the three finalists were Southern Luzon Command commander LTG Delfin Bangit, Philippine Army Commanding General LTG Victor Ibrado, and AFP Deputy Chief of Staff LTG Rodrigo Maclang, and he seemed to favor Ibrado, while being very cool in discussing Bangit. Secretary Esperon imparted that the controversy over ICRC hostages in Jolo did not damage MG Juancho Sabban's chances of being Marine corps commandant, but added that the problem was what to do with Philippine Marine Corps Commandant MB Ben Dolorfino, whom he characterized as less than a dynamic leader and likely incapable of handling an important command. Still, Dolorfino's seniority and his status as one of few high-ranking Muslim generals militated against "putting him out to pasture."

15. (C) The Ambassador raised the subject of Lance Corporal Daniel J. Smith, underscoring our frustration with the slow pace of justice, and noting that Smith's appeal of his rape conviction had been pending in the appeals court for nearly a year and a half -- notwithstanding the Philippine Constitution's prescription that appeals must be resolved within 12 months. Esperon confessed that he had little sympathy for Smith, whose behavior "whether criminal or not reflected poorly on the U.S. Marine Corps," but he nonetheless agreed that the time was ripe for the case to be resolved. The Ambassador highlighted that the status quo represented a continued and unnecessary drag on bilateral relations.

KENNEY